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706T DXpedition. . .to Socotra Island By Paul S. Ewing-N6PSE

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The team is now home. The gear is checked and put away for our next DXpedition. Fund-raising is underway to help cover our tremendous license costs for the 706T DXpedition to Socotra Island, Republic of Yemen.

This is our story. In 2010, long-time and well-known DXpeditioners, Dmitri Zhikharev-RA9USU supported by Hrane Milosevec-YT1AD, visited Sana'a Yemen and Asmara, Eritrea hoping to come away with a license



Team 2 breaks out the INDEXA banner in the sunlight of Socotra.

and approval to carry out DXpeditions at a later time.

Dmitri was able to form a relationship with Mr. Abdul Hameed from Friendly Yemen Tours of Sana'a. This relationship would prove to be vital as Mr. Hameed was well known and respected within the Yemeni Government in Sana'a.

Amateur radio in Yemen, while long forbidden, is relatively unregulated. There is no set of laws or policy in place to govern amateur radio. Thus, the answer is always no! Mr. Hameed had the Government contacts and was able to explain the purpose of amateur radio and the benefits of an amateur radio DXpedition within Yemen with the assistance of Dmitri.

Working together for a period of several years, Dmitri and Abdul worked to overcome the concerns and fears and to help design the process which could enable the issuance of an amateur radio license. Also playing a significant role in gaining permission for the DXpedition was Dr. Yaroslav Zheleznov. Dr. Zheleznov is a well-known Russian Physician in Sana'a. He knew many of the top Yemeni Government officials and was able to lobby on behalf of the DXpedition. His wife, Karina would handle many of the arrangements and logistics for

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the team. This was a huge effort starting with Dmitri involving locals in Sana'a including within the Ministry of Information.

Also playing a critical role in the early stages of the proposed DXpedition was Mr. Fares Al Sanabani, Chief Editor and owner of the Yemen Observer newspaper and the Al Qqiq television station. Mr. Al Sanabani was a strong supporter to bring the 706T DXpedition to Yemen.

The government of Yemen was interested in showcasing the remote island of Socotra as a tourist destination. Over time, it was decided to focus on an amateur radio DXpedition to the Island of Socotra to showcase the tourism aspects and to provide a safe venue for the amateur radio DXpedition.

As the proposal for an amateur radio DXpedition made its way through the various Yemeni Ministries, Dmitri decided to make a follow up visit to Sana'a in April of 2012. Dmitri was very excited to find that his proposal was being seriously considered. Dmitri then visited Socotra Island to scout out a venue for the potential DXpedition. Dmitri knew that doing a DXpedition in Sana'a would be challenging as the city is surrounded by very tall mountains. In addition, there is a very high level of man-made noise from within Sana'a that would have interfered with weaker signals on the radios.

I'll never forget the excitement as we were traveling to the IDXC Convention in Visalia this past April. My friend David Collingham-K3LP called me and told me that Dmitri was able to get a Yemeni license and that the call sign issued was 706T. David would be the Co-Leader along with Igor "Harry" Booklan-RA3AUU and was organizing a first and second team to go. I was delighted to be asked to join the team!

The operation was approved for the dates of May 1-15, 2012 which was only a week away. We would need to bring our rigs, amplifiers and antennas with us on our flights.

I was thrilled on April 25th to receive my Yemeni visa and travel permit just four hours before my flight to Istanbul. Whew that was close!

As an American, when you arrive in Yemen, you are not sure what to expect. Surprisingly most signs were in both Arabic and English. Most of the airport

staff speaks English and we really did not encounter any difficulties. Security is very tight in Yemen. The



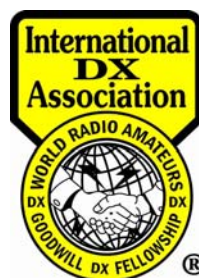
A welcome to Yemen in English.

airport is fully staffed with armed police and military. The Kalashnikov AK47 is a very common sight in Yemen. As we entered the old city of Sana'a we could see the change in the architecture and the age of the buildings. The streets became very narrow, some only six feet wide and it was slow going as we made our way to the Burj Al Salam hotel. We arrived at 3:00 AM and would try to get some rest before the remaining Russian members of the first team arrived a few hours later.

The next morning we held our first team meeting at the hotel. The goals and objectives of the DXpedi-

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tion were discussed as well as other smaller details. We used a very unique room located on the very top of the hotel. This room had a very high ceiling and very tall windows with a view of the entire city of Sana'a and surrounding mountains. There were many mosques in the neighborhood, including next door to the hotel, so we heard the call to prayer in Arabic many times throughout the day. We chatted with the team members and learned a little about each other.



The International Team gets to know one another.

David-WD5COV and I were the initial Americans on the team; most of the remaining members were all elite contestants from the Robinson Contest Club in Russia. Most of them were very experienced DXpeditioners. We were also delighted to re-join our friend and fellow DXpeditioner Hrane Milosevec-YT1AD.

We spent the remainder of the day sight-seeing and touring the old city of Sana'a. We visited a very old "castle" located on the edge of the city, perched high on a big rock that would make it very defensible. We also saw several ancient Pyramids. We did not know that there were Pyramids in Yemen!

We also visited a very large and ornate mosque on the edge of town, before undertaking a walking tour of the old city of Sana'a including my favorite part—the large outdoor souk or open shopping market. The souk was an amazing collage of sights, sounds

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The "Castle". Below, a large mosque was a sight to behold.



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and smells. They had different areas for spices, coffees, nuts, dates and live animals. Many of the shops or stalls were hand crafting their own items for sale. We felt very safe and welcome as we



The souk was a bustling place well into the evening hours.

strolled through the souk. Many shop keepers waved hello and said "Welcome to Yemen" to us. Some of them beckoned us to join them for a tea or soft drink. They never expected any payment from us and often rejected our money.



N6PSE, WD5COV and Yemeni guides. (Those ceremonial or traditional scimitar-shaped knives in their belts surely enhanced the sense of security of our intrepid DXpeditioners!—Editor)

The next day, we would pack all of our gear and head to the Sana'a airport for our flight to Socotra. We all loaded into a small twin engine jet aircraft for our 2 hour flight to Socotra Island.



Pushing hundreds of kilograms of gear through airports is standard operating procedure.

While flying over Southern Yemen, I could not help but think of the conflicts taking place in the vast deserts below. Daily news reports of Al-Qaida taking on Yemeni troops have to give you pauses about traveling to this area. Landing in Socotra, a blast of hot air filled the jet as the door was opened. It was much warmer here than in Sana'a. We walked the tarmac and into the simple terminal. All of the signage was now only in Arabic and English was not evident. Immediately I could see the differences in the appearances and features of the Socotrans vs. the Yemenis in Sana'a. In Sana'a the people had a distinct Arab look, they were mostly short and broad. However the Socotrans appeared to be African in origin, possibly from Somalia. Their appearance was much different than the Yemeni's I had met in Sana'a. The Socotrans were much taller and very thin.

While driving to our hotel, our driver explained some of the Socotran values and customs to us. He said that we can photograph anything we want except women. It is forbidden and against the law to photograph any women. As we would soon see, 100% of Socotran women wear the black veil from head to toe so you really could not capture their es-

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sence with a photograph anyway.

Our driver explained that Socotra is a small archipelago of four islands just 240 Km east of Africa. Socotra is known to be very hot and dry and this has created many plant species found in no other places of the world, and it has been recognized by UNESCO as a World Natural Heritage site. Socotra is well known for having a very unique variety of stunted trees that grow only on Socotra Island and nowhere else.

We asked our driver about the Russian T-72 tanks strewn along the road. He explained that they were left over from the War between the North and South of Yemen. He said that Socotra used to be a part of South Yemen, but when the war was lost they joined Northern Yemen.

We drove about 20 miles down the coast of Socotra to the small town of Hadibo. Hadibo is much smaller and different than Sana'a. The town is small and dusty with no paved streets or roads. Most notable are the hundreds of wild goats that live in the city, often laying by the roadside or eating at the many trash piles. At night, the goats lay all over the streets and alley ways and you have to step over or around them as they sleep.

We arrived at the Summerland hotel and began to offload our gear. It was really hot and the air conditioning in the lobby was the best welcome possible. The Summerland hotel was fairly modern and was self-powered with a diesel generator 24X7. Dmitri had done a really great job scoping out this venue for the DXpedition. We went to the roof of the hotel and



Downtown Hadibo.

surveyed where we would place our antennas and the directions required to best reach our targets.

We began to unpack and sort out our antennas and coax lengths. This hotel would be the primary SSB hotel, whereas the Taj Socotra hotel just 600 meters down the road at the other end of town would be the CW hotel. Using two hotels would increase our costs but would provide for better band separation and allow us to be more efficient. We worked into the night until we could not see any more.

Each small neighborhood has its own Mosque. We heard the call to prayer held five times a day starting at 4AM and the last call to prayer at about 8PM. In Socotra everything stops at prayer time and the streets are filled with men, women and children walking to their Mosques. Even the ever present soccer game taking place on the soccer field behind our hotel would cease only to resume each time after prayers. It was very clear that Islam is the center of everything in Socotra.



Mosque behind our hotel.

The next morning, we started early to continue setting up our antennas. David-WD5COV and I worked on my five band Spiderbeam up on the highest part of the roof. Dima-RA9USU and Alex-RM2M helped raise the Spiderbeam, while Aleksey-UA4HOX, Vlad-R7LV, Harry-RA3AUU and Oleg-R3FA were busy setting up the Yagi and various other vertical antennas. It was getting very hot and we struggled to work in the scorching heat. This Spiderbeam had been a backup antenna in South

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Sudan and this was its first deployment as our primary SSB antenna. The Russians also brought an aluminum Yagi that was much like the Force 12 C3 antennas. Six elements, two for each band on 10/15/20. This Yagi would be fixed on Japan which was in nearly the opposite direction of most of our antennas. The Russians also set up several vertical dipoles for 12/17 and 40/80 meters. A SteppIR BigIR vertical was also set up and often used for 30 meters.



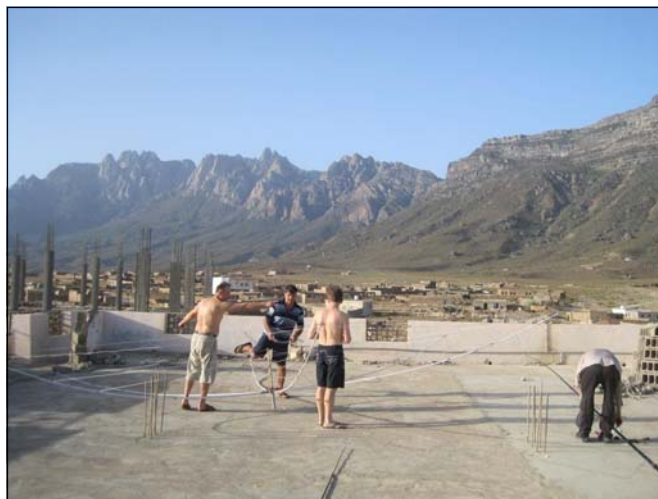
RA9USU and N6PSE assemble Spiderbeam on the hotel roof.

Soon, the afternoon sun would take its toll on us and we crawled off the roof seeking shade and water. Because of the heat, our antenna raising project that should have taken one day, took nearly three days to complete at the two hotels.

As we finished setting up the SSB antennas, we walked the main street of Hadibo to get down to the Taj Socotra CW hotel. We really stood out as a team of Americans and Russians walking through town. The Socotrans are a little more shy and reserved than the Yemeni's in Sana'a but it was very evident that while we were a curiosity in Socotra, we were in no danger and there was no fear of us. We were glad to find that we could walk about any time of the day or night in complete safety and we were very well received by the Socotrans.

Down at the CW hotel, Dave WD5COV and I set out to set up his Hy-Gain TH3 while the Russians set up verticals and a Hex-Beam. It is important to remember that we had to bring light equipment as everything was hand carried in our aircraft with us and no

heavier gear could have been shipped ahead. Surprisingly, these smaller antennas elevated over the sea without any terrain or obstacles in the short-path did very well. There were very daunting mountains located just behind our town that made long path opportunities unfavorable.



Longpath takeoff was not promising due to mountains behind our hotel.

We finished setting up the antennas just a few hours before we were to be QRV at 0000 UTC for fifteen days of operation. I was glad to be on twenty meters SSB at QRV. The signals from Southern Europe were incredible. Immediately, I worked my friend Tony-EA5RM and that was the first of many thrilling moments for me.

We were given strict instructions at our first team meeting to limit our pile ups to 20 KHz and no wider than that. Within a few minutes my pile up was 40 KHz wide and was full of incredibly strong signals. Soon I could not discern any partial call signs. All I could hear in my headset was a strong roar of so many callers. I called out, "the station ending in Yankee" then about 20 stations ending in Yankee came back to me and I was able to eventually pull out a call sign. Then I tried "Station ending in X-Ray your full call?" I then had about 20 stations ending in X-Ray come back to me. I tried this technique for several hours as it seemed the only way to pull out a call from the roar of the many callers. I was very glad to be operating one of the six Elecraft K3 radios at Socotra as I was quite familiar with them and

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they are really great in this kind of strong signal-pile up situation.



Your author found having a familiar radio to be a great help in handling big pileups.

Most of the 706T team members chose eight hour shifts and we all operated at least sixteen hours per day. One of our many goals was to break the QSO record recently set by the T32C team. Given that we had only ten operators and fifteen days of activity, I don't think we had a realistic chance of breaking this record, but we certainly worked hard and came pretty close!



Team Leader-Dmitri,-RA9USU, (in background) works through the SSB pileup while Yuri, RL3FT, (foreground) does the same on a different band.

My next shifts would have me working on 40 meters and later 12 meters working Europe for many hours on end. My fourth shift had me working on 17 meters at 4AM local time which was the start of the

opening to North America. I was delighted to get this opportunity.

As I went QRV, I could sense that the pile up was incredibly large. I pulled out some of the stronger stations right away, until the pile up was just a dull roar. I tried the *who is the yankee* and *who is the X-ray* technique several times before deciding that my rate could increase if I would work by the numbers. I announced that I was going to work North America by the numbers in this order of call areas: 1, 2, 3, 4, 8, 9, 0, 5, 6 and 7. This allows me to follow propagation as it rolls across North America. The W1/K1 stations were really strong as were the W2 stations as I moved along. I worked many W3, W4 and W8 stations. The W9 guys were pretty weak. I made a note of the time and band and I was leaping ahead of my propagation. When I called for W0 I didn't hear anyone, so I quickly announced that I was starting over at W1.

Another run through the call areas brought stronger signals from W9 and even a few guys from W0 and W5, however no one yet from W6/W7. I made notes of the times. Another pass through the number and this time W0 & W5 were very strong and I soon had a really good opening to W6/W7. It was really fun to hear some of the familiar calls from back home in California and to give them their signal reports. I knew that many of them needed a 70 contact for an all-time new one.

I made notes on each shift of which band/times were best for each call area. Interestingly, 17 meters would prove to be one of the best all-around bands during this DXpedition. At times, it was open world-wide and I could hear anyone, anywhere. Once the opening to W6/W7 faded, I could hear KH6 and beyond to ZL/VK. I made notes of their times and would often include calls for KH6/VK/ZL when working the West Coast. The VK stations were probably the most difficult to work and I shared their joy and excitement when we were able to complete the many contacts made to them.

Getting into the groove

My second shift on 17 SSB was even better than the first. The band conditions were incredible and my five band Spiderbeam was performing very well. It was elevated about 50 feet above the ground and

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looked out across the soccer field and across the vast ocean. I found that if I pointed it to Spain, that I could easily work all of Europe and then the USA as soon as that opening took place.

As I did not operate any CW, I asked my friend Dave-WD5COV to give some insight into what it was like working CW as 706T:

One can only imagine how the pile-ups will be before the DXpedition begins. When we began our operation from Yemen (706T) I was excited to learn my first eight hour shift was on 17 meters CW, my favorite mode. After my first CQ, the pile-up grew rapidly and became very massive. This was the norm for the entire DXpedition. The fun meter was fully pegged!

With Europe in our backyard, the signals and pile-ups were beyond huge. The signals from North America and Asia were not as strong most of the time but the pile-ups still raged. Once I would work a station it seemed everyone would zero beat the prior frequency and start calling. It was near impossible to stick to a single frequency. I would constantly tune up and down the pile working stations. It didn't take long for stations to figure this out and ones that found a "hole" made the log in no time. Many contacts were made working the edges of the pile-ups. With Q rates ranging from three to five per minute, after eight hours straight operating I was exhausted. We were fortunate to experience good band conditions for most of the expedition. It seemed that the higher bands would stay open nearly all day and night! Working CW from Socotra Island, Yemen was truly a treat for me. Thanks to the thousands who called in, Dave WD5COV.

Within a few days, the team realized that we needed a better location for our 160 meter operations. Both the CW and SSB hotels had too much noise for successful 160m operations. We had seen a coastal hotel south of town that was only partially constructed. The rooms were made of stone and mortar and only a few had roofs put on them. They were right at the edge of the sea. Each afternoon two team members would be dropped off at the remote 160 camp and picked up the next morning after sunrise.



Nice beach, but after working 160m all night, a few hours of sleep are needed more than a swim for the 160m crew.

In a few days, some of us would return to our home countries, while a few fresh replacements would arrive. Going home after week one was myself, Harry-RA3AUU, Andy-UA3AB, Vlad-R7LV, Chak-JT1CO, and Hrane-YT1AD, while our replacements were David-K3LP, Jeff-K1ZM and Andy-LZ2HM. Mohammed from the Ministry of Information was also going home, while Ahmed Amer from the Ministry of Information was staying on until the completion of the DXpedition.

We saw our replacements arrive at the airport, but due to security restrictions we could not talk to them other than to just wave hello from the distance. We boarded the same twin engine small jet. This time we were tired and not at all alarmed when the pilot called out Allah Akbar Allah Akbar Allah Akbar as he was revving his engines and preparing to take off back to mainland Yemen.

Within a few hours, we were back in Sana'a and the very comfortable BurJ Al Salam Hotel in the old city. The Russian team members only had a few hours to relax before their flights to Cairo and then on to Moscow, however I had about 30 hours to relax and continue exploring the old city before my flights to Istanbul and then back to Los Angeles. Oh what an adventure this has been!

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Co-leader David, K3LP (left) and Leader Dima, RA9USU (right) relax a few minutes in the waning hours of the DXpedition.

Closing thoughts

The people of Yemen seem very warm, friendly and welcoming. They are very religious, hard-working people trying to take care of their families and make a living. I sensed no animosity from anyone in Yemen. Everyone seemed glad to have us visiting their country.

The Ministry of Information staff was very willing and cooperative with us. It is really interesting to under-

stand the reasons why Amateur Radio was not permitted in Yemen for so long, they just really did not have a way to regulate it, thus it was forbidden.

There is now sincere interest within the Ministry to regulate and propagate Amateur Radio within this nation. This was an incredibly interesting DXpedition, although a bit arduous at times with the heat and heavy lifting required. I am really grateful for this experience and the memories that I will cherish for the rest of my days.

I particularly want to thank INDEXA for their early and on-going support of the 706T DXpedition. It is only through the generosity of organizations such as INDEXA that some of these most rare entities can be brought to you.

Thank you es 73—

Paul S. Ewing Team member-706T
Socotra, Yemen

New Edition of DX World Guide Now Available

Franz Langner (DJ9ZB), avid DXer and longtime member of INDEXA's Board of Directors, has recently completed the revised 3rd edition of his DX World Guide. Published by CQ Communications, the new guide is available in both CD and printed formats. The new edition consists of 384 pages in full color and includes details on more than 300 DXCC entities. Detailed ordering information can be found using the link in the ad below.

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